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5/25/03 LATIMES 1

Page 1

5/25/03 L.A. Times 1  
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Section: Business

' Nemo ' May Hook Public on Plight of Marine Life

The pet fish trade, already accused of inhumane treatment, fears the movie could worsen its image.

Jerry Hirsch  
Times Staff Writer

In "Finding Nemo," a tropical fish named Gil, grizzled and scarred from his many attempts to escape an aquarium in the lobby of a dentist's office, tells a newcomer to the tank: "Fish aren't meant to be in a box, kid. It does things to ya."

The line drew laughs from the audience at an advance screening of the latest computer-animated offering from Walt Disney Co. and Pixar Inc., which opens Friday. But it's eliciting grimaces from people in the international trade of live ocean fish, coral and other marine life, a \$200-million industry.

Pet fish importers -- whose international hub is in Southern California -- worry that the story of the plucky orange-and-white-striped clownfish, kidnapped from his home in the Great Barrier Reef, will create a backlash against an industry already laboring under the perception that it damages fish habitats, particularly coral reefs.

"There is a political message," said Burton Patrick, chief operating officer of six Pet Supplies Plus stores in the Pittsburgh area and a former operations manager for the Detroit Zoo. Disney "wants kids to feel sorry for something that might or might not have a concept of mortality."

Eric Cohen, co-owner of Sea Dwelling Creatures Inc., a Los Angeles distributor of wild-caught marine fish and coral, wonders whether moviegoers will "walk out and say that fish should not be separated from their friends in the ocean."

There's no doubt that the creators of "Finding Nemo" want children to become emotionally attached to the quirky fish characters, said Andrew Stanton, a Pixar veteran who wrote and directed the film. That's what moviemaking is about.

And Stanton doesn't mind if viewers leave theaters thinking about the environment as well.

"The random hobbyist doesn't think that taking one fish out of the ocean will matter," said Stanton, who got the idea for the story from the "funky fish tank in my dentist's office when I was a kid."

5/25/03 LATIMES 1

Page 2

"I always assumed these animals were caged and wanted to go home," he said.

The perceived mental state of aquarium-bound fish aside, Adam Summers, a UC Irvine marine biologist and a consultant on "Finding Nemo," said catching sea life "for the pet trade really does have an effect on tropical fish stocks.

"There have been terrible problems in the Philippines and other places where there are pretty-colored fish people want for their aquariums," he said.

Like movies, the trade in marine animals is very much a Southern California industry. The business is dependent on the long supply chain that starts in the coral reefs of the Pacific and Indian oceans and leads to 104th Street near Los Angeles International Airport, a stretch known as Fish Street and regarded as the nucleus of the world's aquarium business.

There, about a dozen firms import live fish, coral, shrimp, crabs and other sea creatures, which arrive by air in foam-lined packing boxes from such places as Fiji, the Philippines and Indonesia. The animals then are resold to pet and fish stores across North America and Europe.

This is a sensitive time for the industry. It has fought off proposals for federal legislation to curtail the numbers and types of sea life that could be imported to the United States, in part by promising to develop a policing program.

At least one nonprofit organization is promoting an independent certification process to help ensure that tropical fish caught in the wild are treated humanely, similar to the dolphin-safe campaign that informs buyers of canned tuna that, presumably, no dolphins were netted in the course of catching tuna.

The Honolulu-based Marine Aquarium Council is in the early stages of a program to award its stamp of approval to businesses within the pet fish supply chain -- from reef to retailer -- that meet its standards. Its goal is to eliminate harmful collection methods, such as the use of poisonous sodium cyanide to stun wild fish, and to reduce the mortality rate of aquarium fish during transport and storage.

The group also is endorsing attempts to farm-raise tropical fish as a way to avoid endangering species and their reef habitats and to keep hobbyists' aquariums filled with eye-catching specimens. The best success story to come from the captive breeding of tropical fish involves the clownfish, the same species from which the star of "Finding Nemo" hails.

The council hopes the movie will help spotlight its efforts to clean up the industry and "alert new potential hobbyists about the good and the bad ways that tropical fish are harvested."

The organization already has used the film as a marketing opportunity: With the help of Cohen of Sea Dwelling, one of the largest marine fish distributors, it set up an aquarium of clownfish and other marine animals at the "Finding Nemo" premiere party last Sunday.

And although the industry worries about a backlash, some believe the opposite will happen. The film could inspire children to nag their parents for "Nemos" of their own, sparking a boomlet in the saltwater aquarium hobby, said John Brandt,

5/25/03 LATIMES 1

Page 3

legislative representative for the Marine Aquarium Societies of North America, the umbrella body for hobbyists.

Sales of Dalmatian puppies rose after Disney's 1996 release of its live-action version of "101 Dalmatians." Anticipating a similar reaction, Paul Holthus, executive director of the Marine Aquarium Council, said, "It's important that this demand is met with marine life that's been harvested from the sea or captive-bred in a manner safe for both the fish and the environment."

Yet some fish trade veterans doubt the Marine Aquarium Council efforts will make a difference in the way the industry operates.

"A lot of people have serious concerns that MAC amounts to little more than greenwashing of business-as-usual in the aquarium trade," said John Tullock, founder of the American Marinelife Dealers Assn. and author of "Natural Reef Aquariums," a respected hobby manual.

Tullock, who has left the AMDA and now objects to collecting tropical fish, sees "Finding Nemo" as helping to make a case on the animals' behalf.

"I am pleased to see that the issue of taking wild fish off coral reefs to decorate dentists' offices is getting some well-deserved attention," he said.

Although there is wide consensus that coral reef habitats are in crisis worldwide, how much damage is inflicted by the aquarium trade is a source of debate even among marine biologists.

"The major threats are overfishing for food, which has destabilized whole reef systems; global warming, which kills corals directly; and in coastal areas, [from] pollution and sedimentation," said Gregor Hodgson, a UCLA marine ecologist and director of the Reef Check global coral reef monitoring program. "In comparison to these threats, the marine aquarium trade is a small problem."

Whether "Finding Nemo" will focus attention on the plight of coral reefs and their inhabitants remains to be seen, Hodgson said. But as pet-store owner Mitch Gibbs of Bowling Green, Ky., put it: " 'Bambi' did not stop deer hunting."

----- INDEX REFERENCES -----

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NEWS SUBJECT: (International Issues (1IN59); World Trade (1WO85); Economics & Trade (1EC26))

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5/25/03 LATIMES 1

Page 4

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5/25/03 LATIMES 1

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